

## **Multi-Generational Small Group Ministry**

*By Reverend Jim Magaw, Chapel Hill, North Carolina*

I recently completed the master of divinity program at Meadville Lombard Theological School, where one of the requirements included the development and implementation of a new program at each student's internship congregation. This "focused initiative" was meant to address some clearly identified need in the congregation while also providing an opportunity to learn what it's like to get a new program off the ground and running.

At my internship congregation, the Eno River UU Fellowship (ERUUF) of Durham, NC, I identified the following issues to address through my focused initiative:

- Influx of visitors and new members, especially families with young children, who did not have established connections within the congregation.
- Relatively few opportunities for people to connect across groups in deep and meaningful ways.
- Need for all to develop and enhance listening skills and to recognize sharing and listening—without trying to "fix" or debate—as a potentially transformative spiritual practice.
- Congregational interest in exploring new ways to be open and welcoming to all, especially those who are from groups not well represented here.

The program I developed was a multi-generational small group ministry program called "ERUUF All Together." I described the program in this way: "This program will bring together members and friends of the congregation in a family-friendly environment that facilitates deep sharing and listening to help build a community that values all its members in their diversity and in their common commitments to the greater good."

I identified five specific goals:

1. Provide small group ministry opportunities for more people in the congregation, especially families with children, young adults, elders, newcomers, members and friends not currently involved in small groups, and anyone else who wants to make connections across groups.
2. Facilitate deep listening and explore how to transform our lives through this practice as well as broaden the scope of our listening inside and outside the congregation.
3. Explore issues related to "big questions" of our lives and our times; race, class, gender, age and other issues of "difference"; living as members of a covenantal religious community; families as covenantal; how to live our faith in the larger community and world.
4. Facilitate and strengthen connections among members and friends.
5. Deepen connections between individuals and the congregation as a whole.

The program took place monthly, on the second Saturday of each month from 10:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m., October through May, with the following format each time:

- Opening worship (15 minutes) with an emphasis on participation of all and an invitation to engage with the topic of the day.
- Small groups (1 hour, 15 minutes): Covenant group-style sharing for adults, different groups each week, separate activities for children.
- Shared meal (1 hour), informal sharing at tables, wrap-up and invitation to next session.

## **Program Analysis:**

### **Goal 1: Provide small group ministry opportunities**

The program was successful at providing small group ministry opportunities for people in the congregation. Although I had hoped for an average attendance of 30-35 people each month, the actual numbers were 10-18 adults and 3-5 children. We had a group of 5-6 adults who attended virtually every session. However, the number of adults who attended at least one session totaled 61, which is approximately 10 percent of the congregation.

Of these 61 attendees, 12 were parents with young children, 13 were elders and 21 were newcomers, most of whom had never before attended a small group or class at the congregation. Approximately 12 of the attendees (in addition to the newcomers) were relatively disconnected from small group programs in the congregation. In addition, the program drew 10 people who were already involved in covenant groups or chalice circles but were interested in growing the congregation's small group ministry program and extending this experience to those outside their circles. We were not successful in involving youth in this program.

When I originally conceived the program, I had hoped that more children would attend and that I could recruit youth to work with the children doing activities related to each month's theme. I did in fact recruit several youth who were interested, but the number of children who showed up was not enough each month to justify this part of the program, so this component was dropped. Youth, along with an adult, did help provide childcare for sessions as needed.

### **Goal 2: Facilitate deep listening**

The program succeeded beyond my expectations in this regard. One concern that I had at the outset was whether people would be willing to share on a very deep level with people they did not see on a regular basis. Each month the groups were totally different, so there wasn't the opportunity to build trust among a small group over time as there is for covenant groups and chalice circles. However, in each group that I observed, participants were sharing honestly, openly, and authentically.

In addition, as part of the program, I trained 5 small group facilitators, most of whom had opportunities to lead small groups, and each of whom did an excellent job. One of my primary roles was helping lead facilitators through the group experience and making sure they had what they needed to succeed. The facilitators are the group who will likely keep this program alive, with support from staff, after my internship ends.

### **Goal 3: Explore big issues**

Themes for each month were large, universal issues: Broken and Whole, Grace and Gratitude, Hope and Possibility, Courage and Perseverance, Presence, Forgiveness and Reconciliation, Joy, Letting Go. I wrote session plans, as well as brief opening worship experiences, for each of these topics. My goal was to elicit sharing that invited people to go deeper into exploring these issues for themselves and allowed them to be open to the different experiences and perceptions that were shared by others.

Issues of difference were explored sometimes explicitly, especially in the "Courage and Perseverance" and "Forgiveness and Reconciliation" sessions, and sometimes implicitly. It helped to have a wide age range of participants (from mid-20s to mid-70s) and people from a variety of different racial, ethnic and class backgrounds.

Throughout the program, the emphasis was placed on our personal engagement with these larger issues and creating a "quilt of wisdom" that would inform our own experiences and allow us to see others'

experiences of these same issues with open hearts and open eyes.

**Goal 4: Facilitate and strengthen connections among participants**

Although it's difficult to quantify how connections might have been strengthened, the feedback I have received has been universally positive in this regard. The sharing that I have observed has been open-hearted and passionate. I observed that the sense of connection spilled out over the small group sharing and into the closing lunch, during which there has been a lot of animated informal conversation and fellowship.

I know of several examples of people who participated in the program who have reached out to each other outside of the program to offer support—in one case providing meals and rides for an older couple who were having health issues, and in another case helping a single mother who was having problems connect with some important resources.

**Goal 5: Deepen connections between individuals and the congregation**

I am aware of several participants who had not been a part of any congregational programs until this one, but who have gone on to sign up for adult RE classes, covenant groups, and social justice projects. Although it is difficult to gauge how much of their increased participation can be attributed to being a part of this program, I do believe that it has made some difference, especially for newcomers.

**General Reflections:**

A great deal of work went into the front-end of this program—planning meeting space and time, recruiting and training small group facilitators, conceptualizing and writing session plans, promoting the program, and working with staff and volunteers on many small but important issues. I have learned that a small but committed core group of people can make a big difference in a congregation. While I wish that I had been able to involve even more members of the congregation in this program, I am pleased with the results. Participants were able to deepen their connections and their own spiritual journey, while I was able to deepen my learning as a leader in a congregational setting.

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